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SUBJECT: KIM KYUNG-JOON'S EXTRADITION CASE

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: On October 31, the Ambassador met with former Foreign Minister Yoo Chong-ha, co-chairman of Grand National Party (GNP) candidate Lee Myung-bak's election campaign and one of his main foreign policy advisers. Responding to Yoo's earlier request concerning the BBK extradition case, the Ambassador informed Yoo that the State Department had decided to send Christopher Kim (aka Kim Kyung-joon) back to Korea. The Department of State had already authorized Kim's extradition in late 2005; since Kim was no longer fighting extradition, there was no legal reason to delay Kim's return to Korea. End Summary

Kim Kyung-joon to Return to Korea

12. (C) Over coffee on October 31, the Ambassador explained to former Foreign Minister Yoo Chong-ha that Kim Kyung-joon would return to Korea as soon as necessary administrative steps were taken by the ROK side to bring Kim to Seoul. The USG made the decision based on legal procedure to send Kim back. In fact, Under Secretary Burns approved the extradition request in December 2005 so there appeared no legal reason to re-review the case. Politically, Washington had concluded that delaying Kim's extradition as Yoo had urged a week earlier (see para 4), would be perceived as interfering in the Korean election campaign.

13. (C) If Lee Myung-bak was not involved in the BBK embezzlement scandal as he insists, there should be no large damage to Lee's presidential hopes, the Ambassador noted. Yoo said despite having done no wrong, the prosecutor's office would release information piecemeal to the press in order to convince the public that Lee was in fact guilty. This process would be highly political and "no one can know how it will play out."

14. (C) Previously, on October 25, Yoo met with the Ambassador to discuss the BBK issue and impressed upon the Ambassador what an "explosive" issue Kim Kyung-joon's return to Korea would be for Lee Myung-bak's campaign. He said that GNP candidate Lee was the victim of fraud through an incredibly professional scheme. Lee was introduced to Kim Kyung-joon through a church connection, and consequently was too trusting. Yoo said that if Kim returned to Korea soon, there was no chance the story would blow over by the election because the case was far too complicated for a quick outcome.

Yoo said he thought it was wise of the U.S. to stay out of domestic Korean politics and argued that we would become involved if we allowed Kim to be extradited during the campaign. If Kim came back before the election, Yoo said it would be a repeat of Lee Hoi-chang's downfall in the 2002 election, when the then-GNP candidate had been the victim of allegations of draft dodging by his son -- charges that were only disproved after he had lost the election. Yoo urged the Department to give the matter sufficient thought and to make a, "thoughtful and wise decision of which history would approve."

Lee Hoi-Chang

15. (C) In the October 31 meeting, the Ambassador asked Yoo about press reports that Lee Hoi-chang was planning to register as an independent candidate, in part to fill the gap in the event Lee Myung-bak were politically wounded or withdrew. Yoo said that he thought Lee Hoi-chang would run for president solely because of personal ambition and was not likely to unify with Lee Myung-bak even if it was clear that Lee Myung-bak remained the front-runner and Lee Hoi-chang could not win. Some politicians, like Lee and Democratic Party (and ex-GNP) candidate Rhee In-jae, lose objectivity and therefore continue to run for president when there is no chance for victory. Lee Hoi-chang hopes that Lee Myung-bak will be forced to step down due to some scandal. Park Geun-hye was unlikely to help Lee Hoi-chang because of personal differences stemming from Park's departure from the party in 2002. Yoo said that the current public clashes within the GNP were simply a struggle between close Lee Myung-bak aide Lee Jae-o and Park Geun-hye but that there would be no division of the party even if Lee Hoi-chang decided to run.

Yoo Summarizes Lee Myung-bak's Strategy

16. (C) During the October 25 meeting, Yoo said that, in regard to the U.S.-ROK alliance, the U.S. had nothing to worry about from Lee Myung-bak. He noted that Lee had come out very strongly in favor of extending the South Korean troop deployment in Iraq. Yoo also said that Lee was trying to avoid coming on too strong on North Korea policy in order to win substantial votes in Jeolla Province (Kim Dae-Jung's home region), though he is adamant that engagement ought not move forward too quickly. Lee thinks capitalist theory should govern relations with the North -- i.e., they shouldn't get anything without giving something. Lee's campaign strategy is to reveal his policy goals a little bit each day. This will make him appear strong on the issues so that he can impress upon the Korean people that he is ready to be president.

VERSHBOW